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ABSTRACT

Techniques for using France's Minitel, a general information network accessible by computer from the United States, for business French courses are outlined. The Minitel system is first described and hardware and software needs for accessing its services are noted. A variety of options for presenting Minitel material to students is presented, including having students spend time on the computer and saving screens on disk or in photographs for later use in various forms. A list of services is offered, with costs per minute (in French francs), is included. A student project that includes a series of steps, activities, and services and that pushes students to explore many business concepts and resources, is described. The project involves setting up a small business. Steps include: picking a business; naming it; establishing a business plan; deciding on the legal form; inquiring about necessary formalities; and optionally: preparing documentation; planning for export; setting up accounting procedures; peripheral activities; and followup Minitel activities. It is argued that the diversity of Minitel services and their currency make them an ideal tool for supplementing commercial instructional materials and adapting course content to student interests. (MSE)

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Using Minitel in the Commercial French Class: Creating a Business

Dr. Jayne Abrate

In foreign language pedagogy it is a commonly held belief that the contextual presentation of vocabulary is most effective. Students grasp the meaning of new words and retain them more easily than by simply memorizing lists. This is especially true in commercial French where not only are the terms often unfamiliar to students but many of the concepts as well, even in their native culture. Therefore, many commercial French texts revolve around situations related to creating and/or running a business in France. However, because of the relative unfamiliarity of the concepts, it is very difficult to have students participate realistically in the simulated creation or operation of a business when they really are at a loss as to how to proceed. Furthermore, teachers and students both know they will probably never be involved in starting or running a business in France as more than an employee, and thus their incentive to participate fully may be less. Minitel services offer an innovative, interactive, and authentic way to involve students in creating a small business, encouraging them to master new concepts and vocabulary in context and to understand and produce authentic language.

Originally developed in France in the late 1970's as an on-line telephone directory, Minitel has grown into a vast information

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ânetwork encompassing almost 18,000 services, the overwhelming majority of which were developed for the general public. In addition, many services directed to current and future business people exist. The language used is absolutely authentic because the information is intended for the French and deals with French concerns, unlike most textbooks. Although French users employ special terminals hooked to their telephones, Minitel can be easily accessed from the U.S. with a personal computer and a modem. Emulation software which allows the PC to act like a Minitel terminal is available free of charge.[1] Beyond the initial set-up costs (computer, modem, and telephone line to which many instructors already have access), expenditures include per minute charges for the time one uses a Minitel service (There are several fee levels ranging from a few cents to a few dollars per minute of use.) and perhaps long-distance telephone charges if one is not in a large city with a local access number. Numerous possibilities exist for presenting Minitel material to students depending on the facilities available and number of students involved. Students might be asked to purchase Minitel time in lieu of or in addition to a textbook for individual projects or research; if this is not feasible, the instructor can access and save Minitel screens of information on diskette and then present it in various forms to the students.[2] This might include distributing files on diskettes for students to consult outside of class, displaying and/or projecting the computer screen in the classroom, recording a Minitel session on videotape, taking slides of the computer screen and projecting

them to the class, or using print copies of the screen with graphics or merely text. The method of presentation can be selected according to the difficulty of the assignment, the need for students to have their own hard copy of information, and the cost involved.

The objective of using Minitel services is to allow students to discover in context the specific business terminology and concepts involved in creating and running a business in France. This information may be used to supplement textbook presentations or on its own. Because many of the services destined for business users in France are quite expensive (9.06 F/min.), an effort was made to avoid those services while still providing a realistic picture of the available sources. The services consulted include the following:[3]

3614 CMP .36 F/min.

Chambre de Métiers de Paris: aides à la création d'entreprise.

3614 SCRL .36 F/min.

Informations sur les entreprises (économie, finances); recouvrement de créances.

3615 ANCE 1.27 F/min.

Agence Nationale pour la Création et le Développement d'Entreprises. Idem 3616 ANCE.

3615 HORECA 1.27 F/min.

Service pour professionnels de restaurant. Guide pratique.

3616 ACCT 1.27 F/min.

Chambre de Métiers de Nancy: aides, démarches, calculs,

informations.

3616 FIC 1.27 F/min.

Fichier d'entreprises. Opportunités d'affaires. Infomations sur l'Europe.

3617 DALLOZ 2.19 F/min.

Mise à jour du code du travail Dalloz. Recherche par page, par article, par table chronologique, par index des matières.

3617 DOCPRATIC 2.19 F/min.

CCI de Paris: informations juridiques pratiques pour les entreprises.

3617 IEXPORT 2.19 F/min.

CCI (Paris): informations pour les exportateurs (formalités, adresses).

3617 SIRENE 2.19 F/min.

Répertoire national des entreprises. Idem 36273644.

More expensive services not consulted here but available include:

36281992 5.48 F/min.

Banque de données sur les entreprises produite par les CCI.

36290059 9.06 F/min.

INPI (Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle): Bilans: comptes annuels des sociétés tenues à publications.

36291003 9.06 F/min.

SCRL Entreprises: Banque de données d'informations financières sur les entreprises.

36291212 9.06 F/min.

Decidial: répertoire et bilans de sociétes, annonces du

BODACC.

36292222 9.06 F/min.

Greffes de Tribunaux de Commerce.

36293030 9.06 F/min.

Informations légales sur les entreprises immatriculées au RCS.

36295555 9.06 F/min.

Fichier d'entreprises françaises.

3617 KOMPASS 5.48 F/min.

Banque de données sur les entreprises françaises et européennes.

There are also numerous services which give samples of French commercial correspondence, but these are quite expensive to use (9.06 F/min.), and, given the availability of good manuals for teaching commercial correspondence, have been omitted here.

Although there are certainly valuable discrete exercises utilizing individual Minitel services, a project which includes a whole series of steps, activities, and services can push students to explore many different business concepts and resources. Such a project involving the creation of a small business might include the following features:

1) Pick a business to start;
2) Name the business;
3) Establish a business plan;
4) Decide on a forme juridique;
5) Find out what formalities are necessary;

Optional steps:

6) Prepare documentation;

7) Plan for export;

8) Set up accounting procedures;

9) Peripheral activities;

10) Follow-up non-Minitel activities.

All these suggestions build upon activities commonly treated in commercial French textbooks by placing them in the overall context of creating a business.

1) Pick a business which you would like to start. Since Minitel services are to be used, students should select a business that might be found in France (boucherie, boulangerie, hôtel-restaurant, épicerie, librairie, etc.). L'artisanat provides a rich field from which to choose, and much information is available regarding this category of business. It is probably not practical for students to consider starting a corporation with many employees, although the required information is there. The instructor can of course set limits on funds and/or size if he or she so desires. Students who are at a loss can consult files of businesses for sale (3616 FIC, for example) to get ideas.

2) **Give the business a name.** Once that has been selected, students must then investigate to see if this name has already been used. They can do so by consulting 3617 SIRENE, 36280059 (INPI listings), or 36293030 (RCS listings). This step is optional, especially if students themselves do not have on-line access to Minitel.

3) Establish a business plan. The 3615 ANCE and 3617 DOCPRATIC services will lead them through questions and procedures necessary to establish a viable business. 3615 ANCE offers "10 règles d'or" for creating a business, and 3617 DOCPRATIC gives additional advice concerning restrictions on who may start a business. Students can also learn about possibilities for government aid for financing the new business and creating jobs and will discover that the creator of an individual business must attend a 4-day management workshop.

4) Decide on a forme juridique. The 3671 DOCPRATIC service leads users through the advantages and disadvantages of various formes juridiques such as individual proprietorship, SARL, EURL, SA, or SNC as well as each one's relationship to different types of business activities, commercial, artisanal, professional, agricultural, or service-related.

5) Find out what formalities and documentation are necessary. The 3615 ANCE service introduces students to the CFE (Centre de Formalitiés des Entreprises) and details the formalities which must be accomplished before the new business owner comes to the CFE, those the CFE will perform, and those which must be completed later. CFEs are run by different organizations which handle various types of businesses; these include the CCIs for many areas or the Chambre de Métiers for artisans. Depending on the forme juridique chosen, the paperwork handled by the CFE might include numerous declarations for starting a commercial activity and with the Registre de Commerce, declarations with the various government

agencies (social security, SIRENE, taxes, or the Inspection du Travail), completion of insurance forms. Other formalities to be completed by the business owner include opening bank and postal accounts, establishing telecommunications and utilities, and, of course, the more complicated writing of statutes for corporations.

The following topics can further enrich student projects:

6) Prepare any necessary documents if models can be found. Many instructors already use certain models of forms in textbooks and available in specialized bookstores in France and applications for such things as bank or postal accounts. These can be included here, although I have not yet found samples through Minitel.

7) Investigate export regulations. 3617 IEXPORT outlines regulations and forms necessary to export goods from France to the U.S., to EEC member countries, or to various African countries. Exercises exploring the possibility of exporting a business' products can be developed.

8) Study accounting terms and develop the necessary documents. 3617 DOCPRATIC offers advice on the accounting obligations for various types of businesses including items such as the livre journal, grand livre, and livre des inventaires. 3614 SCRL provides fiches on the financial health of companies destined for the use of those doing business with these companies. These documents use and provide explanatory information for many accounting and financial terms. In addition, 3615 HORECA gives guidelines for filling out a fiche de paye. Since students working in France would come in contact with this document, learning to

read an difll out one could prove useful. Although the samples are geared toward restaurant workers, those given for salaried employees would be applicable generally and could be transfered to the businesses the students have created. This activity gives them experience with the various charges sociales in France and a better idea of how much it actually costs to employ a worker.

9) Find other ways to use Minitel services to enhance your business. Services related to specific products, mail order, or consumer evaluation can be consulted where applicable. Students can set up a mail order catalog for the products they sell and practice making and filling orders and arranging for delivery, for instance. 3615 HORECA (under the mot clé LEGI) offers legal texts on various specific questions students may have such as TVA rates, collective bargaining, overtime, and firing. These can be consulted as needed. 3617 DALLOZ also provides similar information on a wider variety of issues.

10) Think of some items unrelated to Minitel which you might need for your business. Numerous non-Minitel activities can accompany the creation of a business: designing a letterhead, writing appropriate correspondence for different aspects of the business' development, creating advertising campaigns, packaging, or commercials, placing and filling orders. Any of these activities can reinforce and enrich the students' understanding of all a business entails.

Minitel services offer a great many advantages over most textbook presentations; the use of technical vocabulary in context

and of authentic language intended for the French business person, the accessibility of up-to-date information, and the almost endless possibilities for exploring related issues are just a few. If students themselves are able to consult Minitel on-line, they can use French in a real situation as well as decipher it for study purposes. The diversity of Minitel services makes them an ideal tool for supplementing commercial French textbooks and for adapting course content to student interests.

Notes

1. For information contact Minitel Services Co., 888 Seventh Ave., 28th Floor, New York, NY 10106. Telephone: 212-399-0080.

2. Minitel emulation software permits easy saving, retrieval, and printing of screen contents. Screens graphics can be printed on IBM-PC's with Windows Paintbrush program or on the Macintosh with a number of paint programs.

3. The information given for each service is taken directly from the Minitel Guide des Services (MGS), an on-line directory, and includes a brief description and the cost in francs per minute.